

EPISTLE TO A FRIEND:

A M O N A S T E R Y.

B Y A G E N T L E M A N.

Printed for J. B E W, N^o 28, Pater - Noster - Row; and
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EPISTLE TO A FRIEND:

WRITTEN IN

A MONASTERY.

PARAPHRASED FROM THE GREEK

BY G. CORRIANT

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AN EPISTLE TO A FRIEND.



THE ARGUMENT.

The conversion of the celebrated Abbé de Rance was attributed to the death of the Dutcheſs of Montbazon, whom he tenderly loved. He had been abſent from her ſome time, and was quite ignorant of her death; having got into the houſe, under cover of the night, he went into her apartment by a private ſtair-caſe. The firſt object that appeared to his view was a coffin, which contained the body of his miſtreſs; who had died after three days violent illneſs. As ſhe was to be interred in a family-vault, a leaden coffin was prepared; but being too ſhort, they had, with unheard-of brutality, fever'd the head from the body. Struck with ſo ſhocking an event, from that inſtant the Abbé renounced all commerce with the world, and retired to a monaſtery, where he became a moſt rigid penitent. From thence he writes this Epiſtle to a Friend who had been long upon his travels, and is ſuppoſed to be ignorant of the tragical adventure.

I KNOW too well thy heart will overflow,
To think thy friend is doom'd to ling'ring woe;
To think the vigour of his age is loſt,
And all the hopes his early days could boaſt.
Yet, ceaſe to grieve—Whate'er ſeems good or great
In courts, I find in this ſequeſter'd ſeat;
Beneath an awfull oak I ſit reſign'd;
I bleſs the rains, and welcome in the wind;
With my lone ſtate theſe deſerts beſt agree,
And Nature's rudeſt form moſt pleaſes me:

B

Here

Here frequent pray'rs my doubts and fears dispell,
I spurn the earth, and triumph over hell;
And here at dawn my orisons begin
For LAURA—if so pure a form could sin.

O name for ever lov'd, for ever blest!
For ever treasur'd in this faithful breast!
Tho' long, long since the flame of youth is fled,
And Heav'n now warns me to my neighb'ring dead;
Thy dear remembrance rouses mad desire,
And, for a moment, all my soul's on fire.

My dearest friend, to thee her charms were known,
Ere yet she knew to call those charms her own;
The polish'd form, the dignity of mien,
So oft affected, yet so rarely seen;
The easy wit, the animating grace,
And guiltless smile that revel'd on her face:
Yet, at those years when pleasure gives the rein,
And love and riot dance in every vein,
Her speaking eye each rude attempt suppress,
Nor Heav'n itself was chaster than her breast.

I saw, I lov'd, and oft in sighs convey'd
My fears and wishes to the blushing maid;
Each dawning blush my raging passion fed,
And more and more to sweet destruction led;

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Till bolder grown, the happiest hour I stole,
And spoke the secret of my panting soul :
Tho' low my state, no stern disdain deprest
My suit (she saw my heart and judg'd the rest) ;
But glances, such as pitying angels give
To dying sinners, bade me hope and live.

Her parents saw ; and, rigidly severe,
Convey'd from Paris all my soul held dear.
Rack'd, for a moon, I liv'd a plague to earth,
And curs'd th' ill-boding star that rul'd my birth :
When, lost in grief, no language can express,
A tender line disclos'd her lone recess.
I look'd and read—again I look'd and read—
And, swift as light'ning, to the appointment sped :
'Twas night, dead night ; I scal'd the silent wall ;
I gain'd her chamber—Love conducted all.

I thought to press my lovely LAURA's charms,
And melt transported in her glowing arms ;
When (hold my heart) a lonely coffin stood ;
The floor, the marble stain'd with recent blood :
A feeble taper stream'd a twinkling light,
And barely serv'd to prove the hideous sight.
I rais'd a veil ; the taper just betray'd
A headless corse ; yet still I knew the maid :

Her

Her polish'd form th' unrival'd fair exprest,
And well, too well, I knew her snowy breast.
A marble vase stood near; I turn'd around,
I rais'd another veil—her head I found.
O killing sight! those once-commanding eyes;
Those lips, once ting'd with Nature's richest dyes;
That cheek, that boasted Spring's delightful bloom;
That breath, more sweet than Summer's rich perfume;
That gen'ral grace, that struck the wond'ring sight;
All, all oppress'd by long and joyless night.

I scarce believ'd my sense, I gaz'd around,
While horror fix'd me torpid to the ground;
I grasp'd my sword, resolv'd to end my woe,
But gracious Heav'n restrain'd the impious blow:
Then from the scene with tott'ring steps I fled,
And gain'd my dwelling, less alive than dead.

If there exists some far sequester'd sphere,
(I madly spoke) some dæmon whirl me there;
Where ne'er the bell of pale religion rung,
No gift was offer'd, and no anthem sung;
No friendly talk to cheat the heavy hours,
Nor hope to spread her gay delusive pow'rs;
O bear me quickly to the welcome den,
Alike forlorn by Providence and men!

God

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God of my life! on that disastrous day
 I felt, I own, thy animating ray;
 Thy hand paternal gave my pangs to rest,
 And kindled nobler visions in my breast:
 I saw myself corrupted all within,
 And gaz'd with horror on my daring sin:
 I paus'd on death, on hell's tremendous gloom,
 And vast eternity's unbounded womb:
 I saw the truly good were only blest,
 And all this world gross vanity at best;
 I saw injustice ev'ry law controul,
 And lust and rapine snare th' unwary soul;
 I saw each passion tend to certain woe,
 And, worse, that human pride disdain'd to know;
 Scar'd at the view, I fled those scenes of death,
 And gave my soul to Him who gave me breath.

Resolv'd, resign'd, this wild recess I sought;
 With scenes for holy contemplation fraught.
 The rude, rough rocks, remind me to obey;
 The dodd'ring oaks forewarn me of decay:
 And I, who first by fierce ambition fir'd,
 Blind youth impell'd, and vanity inspir'd,
 The sober charms of solitude despis'd,
 Nor ought but sin, and fulsome pleasure priz'd,

The lewd appointment, and the midnight ball,
At length find rest, and that within this wall.

Here flock the train to whom indulgent Heav'n
The precious gift of Penitence has giv'n:
Those who, with vows, in early youth betray'd
To sin or death, the fond, believing maid;
Allur'd th' easy matron's nuptial flame,
Then spread the tale, and triumph'd in her shame;
Oppress'd the weak, carous'd in orphan's tears,
And doom'd to friendless want their helpless years;
Sapp'd private peace, engender'd public strife,
And arm'd the hand against a brother's life;
Bore down each virtue, marr'd each social end;
And e'en the wretch who wrong'd a trusting friend;
When cloister'd here, feel Heav'n's inspiring breath,
Nor fear to triumph o'er eternal death.

For this we strive: long, long, ere morn appears,
We rise, we pray, we bathe the ground with tears;
Then haste to labour, drain the putrid fen,
Or break th' ungratefull grounds of other men;
Th' unheeded roots we gather yield us bread,
The spring's our beverage, and the earth our bed.
When midnight hour to new devotion calls,
We rise with awe, and bless these rev'rend walls,

Where

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Where saints and martyrs kiss'd the chaf'ning rod,
Despis'd the world, and rested on their God :
No gilded roofs, no silver lamps appear,
But one poor torch, yet God himself is here.
Let pride unlock ambition's sanguine springs,
And wasted nations curse despotic kings ;
No stern alarms this lone retreat infest,
We live in peace, and peacefull sink to rest.

In peace!—Who lov'd like me, and lov'd in vain,
Must ne'er enjoy that virgin's golden reign ;
O no—the flies corruption's tainted den,
And sheds her blessed balm on guiltless men.

When spent with toil, our midnight pray'r I close,
And for an hour indulge in frail repose ;
Insidious dreams my former years renew,
And all the Louvre rushes to my view ;
My LAURA comes, she leads the regal ball,
Ador'd by thousands, and admir'd by all ;
A hundred fighting nobles bend the knee ;
In vain they bend, her eyes are fix'd on me ;
I grasp her hand, we fly to myrtle groves,
She smiles, she yields, she answers all my loves ;
I throw my eager arms—She's gone, she's fled,
And, lo! once more the coffin strikes me dead.

I start,

I start, I shriek, I call on Heav'n to bless,
And plunge within our forest's lone recess:
My aged head receives the dripping fleet;
The savage briar wounds my naked feet;
Unusual horror chills the sacred grove,
The springs, the earth, the forest, seem to move;
My spirits faint, my haggard eye-balls swim,
And cold convulsions rack each tottering limb:
When, lo! she passes in a flaming cloud,
A headless form, and shews the bloody shroud!

God of my soul! without thy strength'ning grace,
How weak, how poor, how blind is human race!
To sound thy praise ten thousand worlds agree,
And nature lifts the grateful song to Thee.

To Thee, with awe, the brute creation bend,
When thunders burst, or sickly rains depend:
Obedient to thy will, the rocks and trees,
Now rest in snow, now bless the vernal breeze:
Yet Man, presuming on his glimmering sense,
Rash Man alone disclaims thy providence;
The truths he dares not controvert, denies,
And, 'gainst conviction, shuts his ears and eyes.

O fatal error! Heav'n alone bestows
Joy free from pain, and undisturb'd repose:

In the vain world our best enjoyment's gross,
Alloy'd and stain'd by sin's offensive dross:
Howe'er disguis'd, rank passion rules us still,
And each, in fact, indulges but his will;
That will, as changeful as an infant's mind,
Shifts there, now here, and veers with ev'ry wind:
One with indulg'd, another phrenzy leads,
Another and another yet succeeds;
Till injur'd Reason abdicates her post,
And, in the monster, all the man is lost.

Not so, my friend, we pass the silent hours
In these secluded woods and mossy tow'rs:
Here pure Religion tolls our only bell;
Here true Devotion warms each humble cell;
Here Contemplation clears the clouded eye,
Expands the soul, and lifts it to the sky;
Propitious angels bless our frequent calls,
And saints who rest retir'd within these walls;
These, these alone our tott'ring steps attend,
Confirm our faith, and hell's dark wiles defend.
On that curs'd night, how black th' infernal scene,
When fiends usurp'd my LAURA's heav'nly mien;
They broke the clouds, they bade the storm retire,
And all my bosom own'd celestial fire.

Ill-fated LAURA, had I never known
Thy matchless form, I then had sinn'd alone ;
A length of years, severest penitence,
And hourly pray'rs, might expiate my offence.

But you, alas ! you saw the early tomb ;
Unvers'd in Heav'n, in youth's intemp'rate bloom :
When flatt'ring tongues impart destructive fires,
And melt the yielding soul to loose desires ;
These warp the soul from virtue's awful shrine,
And well I know that heavy guilt was mine.
On that curs'd pride, which obstinately blind,
Seduces man, and governs woman-kind,
Inflam'd by love, with guileful art I wrought,
And shut my mind against each sober thought :
O dire reflection ! flattery suppress
The holy flame that should have fir'd thy breast ;
Religion else had lent her heav'nly grace,
And stamp'd thy mind as beauteous as thy face ;
Indulgent saints thy lovely eyes had clos'd
In bliss, and all my soul with God repos'd.

“ Thou traitor, falsest of thy perjur'd race !
“ (She sternly cries) hast stolen my soul from grace ;
“ For thee I'm doom'd to bear an age of pain,
“ To call on Heav'n, and yet to call in vain ;

“ Confin'd

“ Confin’d in night, I feel the scorching flame,
“ Or bitter frosts congeal my tender frame ;
“ Or yok’d with dæmons, cleave the murky air,
“ To banish rest, and scatter wild despair :
“ And dost thou, monster, dost *thou* hope to win
“ Eternal bliss, and leave *me* drown’d in sin ?
“ Forbid it truth ; my ghost shall meet thy eyes,
“ And Heav’n, just Heav’n, will listen to my cries.”

Ye hoary woods, and desolated cells,
Ye barren rocks, where savage horror dwells,
I’ll brave your rage, if mercy can be wrought,
And ten-fold penitence erase her fault.
Let Spring produce no herbage, fruit, nor flow’r ;
Let haggard Winter all the year devour
Where I shall roam ; let rains and tempests blow,
And owls and ravens send the screams of woe ;
Let thunders burst, let mountain torrents roar,
And wolves surround me on some desert shore ;
Let curses, plagues, distempers on me fall —
Forgive but LAURA, and I’ll bear them all.

Mean while, dear friend, my simple shroud I spread,
And now prepare my last, and welcome bed :
Yon fun’ral torch, and slowly moving bier,
Remind my soul that Death is ever near ;

But

But Death to us no pallid terror brings,
We court his scythe, and brave his feeble stings;
Rejoice to see a brother gain the skies,
The *man* we pity'd, but the *saint* we prize.

Here, here, my friend, my plain rough coffin stands,
Prepar'd and wrought by these laborious hands;
It calms my spirit, drives vain thoughts away,
And reconciles me to my kindred clay:
I sleep in hope, I spurn my follies past,
And fondly wish each sleep may prove my last;
Resign'd devotion o'er my cavern reigns,
And peace—except poor LAURA intervenes.

But you, my friend, whom mortal passion warms,
To whom fair Italy expands her charms;
Who rove enamour'd thro' the fragrant woods,
Or hang in raptures o'er the limpid floods;
Where soft Tibullus kindled loose desire,
And lofty Maro strung the Epic lyre;
Immers'd in vain delights, perchance may deem
These lines a frantic bigot's sickly dream:
Alas! thou'rt wrong: correct thy fond mistake,
And, ere too late, my sober counsel take;
Dismiss thy follies, set thy spirit free
From sin and death, and taste pure joys with me:

With

With thee in youth the paths of vice I trod,
Indulg'd each appetite, nor thought of God.
For me its charms that flatt'ring region spread,
And pleasure courted to her wanton bed ;
Where Nature, rob'd in constant beauty, shines,
And still on Nature polish'd Art refines ;
Where clust'ring vines adorn the fruitful hills ;
Ten thousand flow'rets deck the chrystal rills ;
Sweet groves of myrtle shade the blooming vale,
And loved rapture swells each balmy gale ;
Where beauty spreads her heart-seducing smiles,
And all the magic of Circean wiles :
The practis'd glance, the modulated lay,
That melts the soul, and charms the sense away ;
Where arts on arts enormous vice disguise,
And shew her pleasing e'en to sober eyes ;
Till late Remorse in squalid weeds appears,
His lean, wan visage drown'd in useless tears ;
Reflection wakes, distracted Conscience wounds,
And grim Despair the prostrate wretch confounds.

Alas ! my friend, how happier our repose !
We feel the comforts Peace with Hope bestows ;
Surrounding faints our humble cells defend,
And holy visions on our sleep descend ;

Repeated pray'rs sin by sin deface,
And ev'ry hour we gain a step to grace :
Our only emulation, to excell
In works of faith——But hold——I hear our bell——
Some friend I ween, who flies this mortal strife,
And bends his course to everlasting life.

O matchless pow'r of unaffected grace !
E'en now a faint has clos'd a tedious race ;
Celestial raptures sparkled in his eyes,
And smiling angels bore him to the skies :
My brother once ; together oft we pray'd,
And oft consoled in the holy shade ;
Resembling fortune bade our souls agree
In stricter bonds, for he had lov'd like me ;
Like me in vain ; like me in youth retir'd ;
All-pitying Heav'n, had LAURA thus expir'd !

And what avails this tenement of clay !
Death hourly saps the base, and melts away ;
All Nature yields to his despotic will,
And all the elements conspire to kill :
E'en whilst I write, a hecatomb expires,
All young, all vain, all forming new desires.
And now the sun emits a feeble ray
On yonder grove, and shuns the parting day ;

The world around an awful silence keeps,
And, as if dead, the whole creation sleeps.

I pant for Heav'n—avaunt my former fears!
When worlds are wreck'd, and spheres encounter spheres;
When Death resigns her empire o'er the ball,
All Nature sinks, and Time itself must fall.
And soon, full soon, that awful day may come;
I'll burst my shroud, and fly to LAURA's tomb:
Then shall that face, which basely rent away,
Alas! now lies with undistinguish'd clay,
Join'd to her form, in primal beauty rise,
We'll soar to bliss, we'll seek the op'ning skies;
There, strong in hope, our mutual passions own,
And plead our loves at God's indulgent throne.

And if, my friend, *you* sought this blest retreat,
And scorn'd the world, my transports were complete.
O hear the call, reject the vail of sin,
Collect thy soul, the glorious work begin;
I'll guide thy steps, immortal truths impart,
And, next to LAURA, place thee in my heart!